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"Reading is to the mind what exercise is to the body."

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THE PUBLIC LIBRARY AND ITS USE

By John Barr, Chief Librarian Public Library, Auckland.

Addresses and papers delivered at conferences of any kind are often useful if somewhat pedestrian. Now and then, however, a person contributes something which is above the average, and one such was given at the last conference of the English Library Association, held at Manchester in September last. This address which was given by Mr Harold J. Laski, Professor of Political Science in the University of London, has the additional virtue of giving the views of a man well qualified to express the opinions of people not professionally interested in libraries, so that motives of a personal or professional kind can be at once cancelled out. His standing as an economist also gives his utterances an importance which would not be the case if the same things had been said by a mere librarian.

I would urge everyone who is interested in the relation of libraries to the thought of to-day to read and ponder this address, which was printed in full in the September, 1935, issue of the "Library Association Record." For those who may not be able to secure a copy I have attempted a brief precis.

Professor Laski commences by stating that schools and libraries to-day occupy a comparable place in the cultural life of the community, and their influence is similar to that of the mediæval university. At a time like the present when the old security has vanished and new ideas of living are being suggested and tried out, it is essential that the means of enlightenment should be maintained against the forces of suppression. One of the greatest of these

means he believes is the public library properly understood and developed. Sensing the danger of accepting the public library as being taken for granted, he urges the need of re-considering what a public library is for and what its implications are. He answers his own questions thus:

"I believe that the purpose of a public library is to make accessible the heritage of culture, in the widest sense of the word, to any who may wish to take advantage of it. The first implication, therefore, of my view is the need to view that heritage as something independent of any special attitude of mind. We are not entitled to narrow its substance because we are socialists or conservatives, Christians or free thinkers, exponents of one philosophy rather than another. The only test we can apply to the content of the public library is the test of significance. If the book meets that test, in the judgment of competent persons, the public is entitled to find it on the shelves of the library. The only censorship we are entitled to impose arises out of this criterion. . . . Our business is to offer him access to knowledge of the human adventure. We are not justified in barring gates which lead to roads we may not happen to approve."

He goes on to say that the public library's duty does not end in merely providing books; its main business is to circulate them. "Every home in this country into which there is not a constant flow of books represents a failure of the public library system." Some of the avenues which the public library has not yet explored are mentioned, among them being hospitals, shops, factories, and various organisations. To remedy this he suggests greater publicity by means of lectures, special book lists, and other media.